Izabela Curyłło-Klag
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University

Rendering the Peculiarities of Style: Witkacy in Translation

1. Introduction

Among the Polish avant-garde artists, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, better known as Witkacy, stands out as an immediately recognizable stylist. Just like his visual creations, which are relatively easy to identify, Witkacy's writings possess distinctive features: the fusion of his idiosyncratic language and an expressive, painterly manner of representation results in an entirely new quality in Polish literature. What challenges does this style pose for the translator? How to make the essential strangeness and uniqueness of Witkacy's texts available to an English reader? This essay will attempt to answer these questions by referring to the translations by Daniel Gerould (occasionally assisted by collaborators, for instance his wife Eleanor or C. S. Durer) and Louis Iribarne. Thanks to the work of these people (Gerould in particular), Poland's chief modernist polymath has garnered significant reception in the English-speaking world. Nearly all of his plays have been rendered into English and staged in various locations across the globe – most recently in New York, Dublin and Melbourne.[1] Witkacy's name is included

[1] A futuristic version of *The Madman and the Nun* was staged in April 2014 as one of Off-Off-Broadway productions. Another staging of the same play took place in June 2014 at Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre, with Witkacy advertised as "a Polish Beckett". The Auto da Fe Theatre Company from Australia is currently preparing a series of readings from Witkacy's texts, as well as the staging of *Tropical Madness*. The Polish witkacologists' website: www.witkacologia.eu offers regular updates on Witkacy's reception abroad.

in major anthologies of drama, textbooks and reference books (e.g. Martin Esslin's classic *Theatre of the Absurd* or *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre,* edited by John Russell Brown); from time to time his achievement is also celebrated during scholarly sessions, literary and theatre festivals (e.g. the 2010 Witkacy Symposium in Washington, or Witkacy 2009 Festival in London). Without good translations, success abroad would not be possible, but to what degree is Witkacy really translatable?

2. Witkacy's phantasmagoric worlds

Reading Witkacy's work, or watching his plays on stage, entails an encounter with a non-mimetic universe. Characters bear impossible names, and the cast may include a Chinese Mummy, an Aboriginal king, a hermaphrodite called Masculette, Richard III borrowed from Shakespeare, or even Beelzebub himself. Corpses rise from the dead and resume their earthly existence, thugs are capable of leading philosophical discussions, madmen run lunatic asylums whereas nuns are creatures of carnal passion. Anything can happen in the Theatre of Pure Form, free from the demands of psychological realism, chronology and logic. Similarly Witkacy's novels, although not written according to the same theoretical principles as plays, conjure up phantasmagoric worlds. For instance, in the closing chapter of *Farewell to Autumn*, Athanasius Bazakbal, prior to being shot by a Russian squadron, journeys through the mountains and feeds a she-bear with cocaine. In *Insatiability* the protagonists indulge in pseudo-intellectual banter and numb their senses with the Murti-Bing pill, while the country is threatened with a Sino-Bolshevik conquest.

Witkacy's aesthetic method is hyperbolic, excessive, and overflowing with the grotesque. He frequently introduces estrangement and ominous tension, mixes heterogeneous elements and conflates the seemingly opposing concepts (such as life and death, in his characteristic device of a dead man/woman walking, a revived corpse). Binary pairs are challenged, boundaries blurred, identities difficult to define. As Daniel Gerould points out, Witkacy's works are more suitable for our world than for his own: he "can be regarded as one of the first postmodern playwrights" (2004: xxiii).

3. A painter's eye

Another aspect of Witkacy's writing style is the influence of his painterly imagination. A talented artist in both capacities, he succumbs to the twinned impulses driving his creativity and "paints with words". By using

tactile or kinetic imagery, and multiplying sensory responses through figurative language, Witkacy unveils before the reader what he sees with his mind's eye. Defamiliarization is his favourite trick: the most mundane sights and phenomena suddenly appear strange, as if we were confronting a totally alien cosmos. This is well visible in character descriptions:

> Prokurator Robert Scurvy – twarz szeroka, zrobiona jakby z czerwonego salcesonu, w którym tkwią inkrustowane, błękitne jak guziki od majtek oczy. Szczęki szerokie – pogryzłyby na proszek (zdawałoby się) kawałek granitu" (Witkiewicz 1985: 486).

> Prosecuting Attorney Robert Scurvy – A broad face, as if made out of red headcheese, in which are incrusted eyes pale blue as the buttons on underpants. Wide jaws – they'd grind a piece of granite to a fine powder (that's how it seems). (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, 1993: 167)

> [Doktor Riexenburg] robił wrażenie statywu od jakiegoś mierniczego przyrządu; zdawało się, że członki jego mogą być odśrubowane i włożone jeden w drugi. Przy tym miał pozór elastyczności pewnej części ciała byka. (Witkiewicz 1992: 33)

> [Doctor Riexenburg] resembled a tripod used to support some kind of surveying instrument; it seemed that his limbs could be unscrewed and the pieces put into one another. And moreover, he himself appeared to possess the elasticity of a certain part of a bull's anatomy. (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould, 1993: 52–53)

Scrutinised by the artist's gaze, Witkacy's protagonists are like creatures from the cabinet of curiosities: odd, entangled in matter, hopelessly misshapen. Interestingly, their emotional states and even aesthetic experiences are also depicted in such a palpable, direct manner. Consider, for instance, the inner turmoil of Genezip Kapen, emerging into maturity, or the sensations of a theatre audience, exposed to a disquieting spectacle:

> Genezyp poczuł w sobie jakiegoś okrutnego polipa, który czepiał się ścian jego duszy, lepkich i zaognionych, i pełzł wyżej i wyżej (w kierunku mózgu może?), łaskocąc przy tym wszystkie nieczułe dawniej miejsca, rozkosznie i niemiłosiernie. (Witkiewicz 1992: 41)

> Genezip felt a hideous polyp fasten itself to the hot, viscous walls of his soul and start crawling higher (in the direction of his brain?), tickling as it went, mercilessly and with obvious relish, hitherto dormant regions. (Witkiewicz, transl. by L. Iribarne, 985: 28)

> Stargana za trzewia publiczność opadła jak jeden flak, po pierwszym akcie, w fotele. Każdy zdawał się sobie jakimś fantastycznym klozetem, w który tamta

banda bezczelnie srała i targała potem, gorączkowo i bezlitośnie, za rączkę z łańcuszkiem – ostatni wentyl bezpieczeństwa. (Witkiewicz 1992: 390)

After the first act, the gut-wrenched audience sank back into their chairs like one limp intestine. Each pictured himself as some sort of preposterous toilet, into which that gang below had been shitting, then frantically and mercilessly tugging on the chain handle – the last safety valve. (Witkiewicz, transl. by L. Iribarne, 1985: 338–339)

Striking and intense, such imagery is not easily forgotten: there is no match for Witkacy in Polish literature when it comes to physicality of descriptions. He has an eye both for the monstrous and the beautiful and is always attentive to detail when rendering colour, shape and texture of things. The visions he conjures could easily be transferred onto the canvas, like in this representative example of landscape depiction:

…szli po skrzypiącym śniegu wielką płaszczyzną, ciągnącą się ze cztery kilometry, aż do czerniejącej na horyzoncie ludzimierskiej puszczy. Gwiazdy mrugały mieniąc się tęczowymi blaskami. Orion płynął już równolegle na zachód nad widmowymi szczytami gór w oddali, a na wschodzie podnosił się właśnie zza horyzontu olbrzymi czerwonawy Arkturus. Ametystowe niebo, rozświetlone na zachodzie od tylko co zapadłego księżycowego sierpa, baldachimiało, kopuliło się nad wymarłą ziemią z jakimś fałszywym w tym momencie majestatem. (Witkiewicz 1992: 87–88)

…they marched through the crunching snow across a vast plain that stretched some four miles before reaching the Ludzimierz forest that was now darkening the horizon. The stars sparkled overhead with a rainbow-hued glitter. Orion was already drifting toward the west, paralleled to the spectral summit of the mountains in the distance, while rising up in to the east, up from behind the horizon, was enormous, orange-red Arcturus. Illuminated in the west by the fading crescent of the moon, the amethyst sky arched like a canopy above the deserted earth with a sort of counterfeit majesty. (Witkiewicz, transl. by L. Iribarne, 1985: 58)

The quote reveals the sensitivity of an accomplished painter. Witkacy's translators must possess visual imagination in order to render his style effectively into the target language.

4. Linguistic creativity

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with translating Witkacy lies in the uniqueness of his linguistic inventions. He narrates his worlds in a specific idiom, full of arresting phrases, weird similes, bold puns, and countless words of

his own coinage. His characters, too, speak in a mélange of bohemian banter, philosophical discourse, colloquialisms, sentimental clichés, scientific jargon, intrusions from highlanders' dialect, borrowings and vulgarisms. The combination often produces comic results, as in the bohemian salon conversation in *The 622 Downfalls of Bungo,* when the artist Tymbeusz addresses Baron Brummel with the following string of invectives:

> Pan jest bydlę, wstrętne bydlę! Pan ma brzuch z czerwonej flaneli, pan ma głowę pokrytą ołowianym śluzem! (*662 upadki Bunga, czyli demoniczna kobieta*, p. 78)

> You are a beast, abominable beast, sir! You have a red-flannel belly, and your head is coated with leaden slime! (transl. by I. Curyłło-Klag)

The collision between the high and the low ("beast, sir"), imagery appealing to various senses, in this case visual and kinesthetic ("a red-flannel belly"), a quasi-scientific metaphor ("head coated with leaden slime") constitute this characteristically Witkacian turn of phrase. He is playing with language to the extent of being almost untranslatable, for example when he combines dialect with academic jargon: "A dyć to jest dialektyka pirsej wody kublastej" (Witkiewicz 1985: 542) / "So that's your new dialectics of the first waterbucket" (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, 1993: 212), or modifies idiomatic structures: "Pożal się Boże, jeśli masz komu" (Witkiewicz 1992: 393–394) /"God help yourself – if you can" (transl. by I. Curyłło-Klag). There is also the difficulty of rendering multilingual puns, where, e.g., the English of the original has to be substituted with other languages to retain the effect of strangeness: "smrood – po angielsku dla tych, co nie lubią ordynarnych wyrażeń" (Witkiewicz 1992: 432) /"'stink' – (or *shtink*, to give it a more Russian pronunciation, for those of you who are not fond of ordinary words)" (Witkiewicz, transl. by L. Iribarne, 1985: 376).

Witkacy uses highly idiosyncratic expressions both in his fictional and non-fictional texts, and his characters speak in the same manner. As the critic Jan Kott points out, there is not much variation of language between particular protagonists, or *dramatis personae*; all of them use the lingo peculiar to their author, no matter if they happen to be "servants, children, or executioners" (Kott 1984: 74). They just cannot be expected to use plain Polish: their speech must suit the unconventional framework of Witkacy's fictional and theatrical worlds. Even the most unassuming figures are likely to utter memorable statements. For instance, Gajowy Maszejko, a character from *Country House* (Griswold the Bailiff in the English version), famously reports that "wszystkie suki zborsuczyły się dziś o szóstej na folwarku" (Witkiewicz 1998: 16)/"all the thoroughbred bitches in the kennels started

mongrelizing" (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould, 1997: 8). Known to generations of Polish secondary school pupils for whom the play is a set text, the neologism 'zborsuczyć się'[2] has entered popular use, like many other terms of Witkacy's invention, e.g. 'kobieton' ('masculette'), 'głątwa' (meaning 'hangover' and sounding similar to Polish 'klątwa,' i.e. 'curse'), or 'pyfko' (from Polish 'piwko,' a diminutive form of 'piwo,' i.e. 'beer'). Most Poles are also familiar with Witkacy's imaginative expletives and invectives from the famous play *The Shoemakers*, such as for instance "wy kurdypiełki zafądziane" (Witkiewicz 1985: 508)/ "you unwiped fatasses" (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, 1993: 184), or "sturba ich suka malowana, dziamdzia ich szać zaprzała" (Witkiewicz 1985: 495)/"son of a sucking prunt, the stupid, lousy, crock-picking skonkies" (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, 1993: 170).

Translating the author whose language is so unique is a daunting task, for it requires a comprehensive approach. One has to immerse oneself in his strange world, embrace his culture, and then re-invent his idiom in a foreign tongue to achieve similar quality, a bit like one would proceed when recreating Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in a new linguistic context.

5. Witkacy's translators into English and their strategies

Witkacy has been blessed with two very good translators, who have rendered most of his *oeuvre* into English. The more prolific and better-known of the two was Daniel Gerould, whose death in February 2012 constituted a great loss to the community of witkacologists and avant-garde theatre scholars. Having seen a performance of *Kurka wodna* (*The Water Hen)* in a theatre in Warsaw in the mid-1960s, Gerould decided to learn Polish and then, in the course of his long career, he translated virtually all Witkacy's plays (some in collaboration with C. S. Durer or Eleanor Gerould), as well as many of his theoretical texts and fragments of fiction. The other notable Witkacy's translator is Louis Iribarne, once a student of Czesław Miłosz at the University of California, now a retired Professor of Slavonic studies at the University of Toronto. Iribarne has translated *Insatiability*, Witkacy's major long novel, and his only work of fiction which is available in English in its entirety.

Gerould's and Iribarne's translations have played a crucial role in popularizing Witkacy in the West, and both scholars have gained recognition

[2] Literally, the expression 'zborsuczyć się' means 'become like a badger' ('borsuk'), but it also contains an echo of 'suka', i.e. 'bitch'. It is now used to denote a situation when something goes wrong, or does not work.

for their achievement.[3] Their work was prompted by a youthful fascination: having stumbled upon Witkacy in the early stages of their academic adventure, neither Gerould nor Iribarne knew much Polish when they first decided they must introduce American audiences to the strange east-European writer. Enthusiasm made them curious about Witkacy's culture, and motivated them to explore his unique language to get a firmer grip on the meaning he had intended.

In a text entitled *Encounters* Gerould describes his relation to Witkacy's work as extremely personal, almost intimate. He emphasises the need for an "immersion in [his favourite] author's life" (2007: 349), to the extent that:

> Translator and author make an inseparable pair; they are twins, the more identical the better. You say to your author, "I am you." Your author replies, "You are me." In fact, you have become your author and perhaps found yourself. (Gerould 2007: 350)

Later on, he uses an even stronger word – possession:

> After translating your author for many years you begin to feel that the author belongs to you. This is a form of possession—you possess the author. After all, in your country the author speaks your words, you speak for the author. But at the same time, the author possesses you and you belong to him. (Gerould 2007: 350)

Such extreme closeness was also what Gerould attempted in translation, striving to remain as faithful to the original as possible. The word-for-word exactness was relatively easy to achieve in prose, especially when rendering just selected passages from longer narratives, as in *The Witkiewicz Reader*. In such instances, Gerould seems perfectly transparent as a translator, keeping the structure and length of Witkacy's text, and finding felicitous turn of phrase:

> Miewał on czasami chwile pokus w kierunku czynów przeciwnych jego najgłębszej istocie, a nawet zgubnych. Jadąc pociągiem na przykład musiał się często trzymać, aby nie sięgnąć do kieszeni i nie wyrzucić za okno pieniędzy i koniecznych dokumentów lub żeby w towarzystwie zacnych matron i poważnych starców nie wymówić nagle jakiegoś dobitnie świńskiego wyrazu. (Witkiewicz 1992: 116)

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[3] Among the many institutions that have awarded prizes to Daniel Gerould are The Polish International Theatre Institute, the Polish Authors Agency, The Jurzykowski Foundation and the American Council of Polish Cultural Clubs. Louis Iribarne was a finalist of the U.S. National Book Award, for his translation of Czesław Miłosz's *The Issa Valley* in 1985.

> At times he felt strongly tempted to commit acts that were contrary to his innermost essence and potentially ruinous. When travelling by rail, for example, he often had to restrain himself forcibly from reaching into his pocket and throwing all his money and identification papers out of the window, or from blurting out some choice obscenity in the presence of proper matrons and staid elderly gentlemen. (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould, 1993: 65–66)

Even in pieces of much greater complexity and difficulty, such as excerpts from Witkacy's last, unfinished novel, *The Only Way Out*, Gerould strives to provide a near-identical, almost literal translation, although some of Witkacy's more inventive neologisms become neutralised. For instance, in the passage below, composite words such as 'punktochwila' or 'bezdnia', are supplanted with slightly less poetic equivalents – 'centre point' and 'abyss', respectively. The word 'wklęsał' is rendered as 'foundered', which suggests sinking rather than assuming concave shape. On the other hand, the translator creates a grotesque effect when he prefers 'crawling *ventre à terre*' over the more faithful 'riding *ventre à terre*',[4] thus perhaps compensating for his previous neutralising translation choices:

> Po prostu machając ukochaną malakką (pseudo) wychylał się w przestrzeń usianą miriadem słońc płonących astronomicznym światłem i rozrzedzonych do ostateczności mgławic, ziejących najprzenikliwszymi promieniami jak „z cebra". Horyzont wklęsał – wszystko zapadało w nieskończoność bezdni czterowymiarowej hiperprzestrzeni: bezpośrednio przeżywał koncepcje Minkowskiego à la Whitehead jadąc ventre a terre na punktochwili, w której skupiały się koordynaty czterowymiarowego continuum o heterogenicznych mimo wszystko elementach. Ta chwila długo trwać nie mogła – pękła, i to właśnie w formie „owej" kompozycji. Gdy ją ujrzał w mglistych zarysach na tle wygwieżdżonej ponad domkami przedmieścia Dajwór (już realnej teraz, jako ziemskie niebo) ciemności, ziemia znów stała się ziemią, zwykłą codzienną, obmierzłą dziurą, a idący stwór człowiekiem, wstrętną „bratnią" pokraką, symbolem ograniczenia i ułomności. (Witkiewicz 1993: 144)

> Casually swinging his beloved (pseudo) malacca cane, he leaned out into space strewn with myriads of suns from nebulae blazing with astronomical lights and rarefied to the vanishing point as they emitted penetrating rays seemingly "by the bucketful." The horizon foundered– falling headlong into the infinite abyss of fourth-dimensional space: Marcel directly experienced Minkowski's concept à la Whitehead crawling *ventre à terre* at the center point where the coordinates of the fourth-dimensional continuum and its grudgingly acknowledged heterogenous elements all converged. The moment could not last long – it burst, and in so doing assumed the form of the "aforesaid" composition. When he caught sight of it dimly outlined against the backdrop of starlit darkness (now more real, seen as an earthly sky) above the houses of the Daivur district, the earth be-

[4] '*ventre à terre*' – Fr. 'at full speed'

> came the earth again, an ordinary, everyday dingy hole, and the walking creature turned out to be a man, a repulsive "fraternal" freak, symbol of limitation and infirmity. (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould, 1993: 296)

In Gerould's translations of plays concerns other than faithful rendering of the original seem to take priority. What becomes important is the tempo and flow of utterances, their rhythm and rhyme. Being a playwright himself, Gerould was fully aware of the requirements of the stage: as he observed, in the case of dramatic translation, "the translator not only translates the author, the translator represents the author to the world, serving as a matchmaker, trying to pair the author off with a theatre" (Gerould 2007: 349). For the sake of making Witkacy "playable" in English, Gerould sometimes allowed himself greater liberty with dramatic texts. One of his more controversial decisions was, for instance, transferring the action of *Country House* from the Polish setting of Kozłowice to what seems more of an English haunted mansion.[5] Yet as far as the style of the translation is concerned, the play is coherent and proceeds smoothly, with very few departures from the original, noticeable in the more challenging excerpts, such as Cousin Jibbery's poetry:

> Siostrzyczki spijają z kieliszków jak naparstki
> Bladozieloną truciznę, straszliwy, blady jad.
> Za chwilę umrą – już w kurczach ściskają się garstki,
> Już szyjki gną się jak łodygi i jedna główka zwisła jak więdnący kwiat. (Witkiewicz 1998: 40)

> The two little sisters from a tiny goblet sup
> Pale green poison, pale green poison, translucent, gruesome bane.
> They soon will be dead—their little fingers in spasms curl up.
> Now their soft necks bend like tender stalks, and one head drooped like a flower thirsting for rain. (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould, 1997: 22)

The lines in the English version contain repetitions and tiny changes of meaning, they are also longer by a few syllables than the original, but generally the idea of poor verse, marred by *fin de siècle* affectation has been

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[5] *Country House* is in fact a parody of a lesser-known Polish play, *In a Small House*, written in 1904 by Tadeusz Rittner. Gerould was well aware of this fact: he discusses the intertextual dimension of Witkacy's drama in the *Introduction* to his translation. Assuming that allusions to Rittner's work might be lost on a wider audience, Gerould decided to move the play to a less specified setting and thus "call attention to its broader parodic impulses and associations with a variety of literary and dramatic genres flourishing in the early twentieth century" (Gerould's *Introduction* to Witkiewicz 1997: xviii).

conveyed successfully. Similarly in the translation of *The Shoemakers* the renderings of swearwords and blasphemies do not need to be very close to the original items, but their florid style and unmitigated flow must be retained, as in the following example:

> ty wandrygo, ty chałapudro, ty skierdaszony wądrołaju, ty chliporzygu bodwantroniony, ty wszawy bum… (Witkiewicz 1985: 508)

> you gazoony, you bahooley, you dejuiced soak-socker, you gutreamedpukeslurper, you lousy bum… (Witkiewicz, transl. by D. Gerould and C. S. Durer, 1996: 184)

By analysing Gerould's successive translations of Witkacy's texts, it is possible to observe that with time he developed an English equivalent to Witkacy's style, becoming ever more exact and nuanced in rendering the original meaning. The late translations gathered in *The Witkiewicz Reader* seem more assimilated to English language, or – to use Lawrence Venuti's term[6] – more 'domesticated' than the plays translated in the 1960s. Witkacy's other translator, Louis Iribarne, has also allowed the writer's style to grow on him, although it is more difficult to achieve it when dealing with one, extensive novel. His translation of *Insatiability* was first produced for a degree diploma, then it was revised for the first publication, and with subsequent reprints. Iribarne treated his task as a work in progress: even though his mentors Czesław Miłosz and Daniel Gerould deemed the translation "fine" when it first came out in 1977, he still found room for slight improvements. Here is an example of this translation strategy:

> Zaśmiał się gorzko, uświadomiwszy sobie swoje położenie. Ale to dało mu „nowy szturch". Nie czekać już tych chwil jak dawniej, tylko je tworzyć świadomie. Czym? Od czego wola? Jak? Zacisnął pięści z siłą, zdolną pozornie cały świat przetransformować na nowo w jego własny twór, w posłuszne mu bydlę, jak suka jego, Nirwana. (Witkiewicz 1992: 162)

> Seeing his present plight, however, he broke out laughing in an acrimonious manner. But this merely provoked him to go out in pursuit of such opportunities, instead of simply waiting around passively for them as in the past. But how? Where would he find the will? He clenched his fists with a ferocity that seemed capable of transforming the world anew into a creation of his own, into a docile beast akin to his bitch Nirvana. (Witkiewicz, transl. by L. Iribarne, 1985: 109)

> But seeing his present state, he broke out in a bitter laugh. This in turn acted as a provocation: you must force such moments to happen. But how? Where would he find the will? He clenched his fists with a ferocity that seemed capable

[6] See Venuti (1995) for his translation theories.

> of transforming the world into his own creation, into a docile beast akin to his dog Nirvana. (Witkiewicz, transl. by L. Iribarne, 1996: 137)

The revised version of the quote is more concise and sounds more natural to an English ear. The translator has given up on rare words such as 'plight' or 'acrimonious' for the sake of their more common synonyms: 'state', 'bitter'. The bitch Nirvana has been changed into a dog, probably to avoid misunderstandings ('bitch' could be taken for a swear word and make the meaning ambiguous, 'dog' does not carry such connotations). The neologism 'szturch' has not been supplanted by an English equivalent, but the phrase 'acted as a provocation' from the later quote is more accurate than the earlier 'merely provoked him' in that it approximates the noun-based structure of the original.

In "A Note about the Translation and Commentary" accompanying the early editions, Iribarne modestly reminds us that "[t]ranslation (…) is the art of failure" and claims that the book he has embarked upon is a work of "sufficient verbal complexity to defy translation" altogether (Iribarne, "A Note" to Witkiewicz 1985: np). Indeed, the text is challenging, given its sheer length: more than 400 pages of experimental and often disorderly prose. Witkacy considered fiction as a form requiring far less discipline than drama; he called novels "sacks" into which anything could be crammed (Witkiewicz 1976: 150). This attitude is also reflected in his chatty narrative style and convoluted, punning language. As one reviewer has pointed out, "Witkiewicz does not ration his words, but hurls them out by batallions in a mass of lengthy clauses" (Thompson 1978: 542). Iribarne's translation is successful at rendering Witkacy's verbal expansiveness, even though it does not adhere slavishly to every word and expression in the original. Sometimes, as the translator explains, "the need for lucidity seemed to justify sacrificing a felicitous phrase or particularly tortuous construction" ("A Note" to Witkiewicz 1985: np). But, being a former disciple of a poet, Iribarne executes his task with panache: *Insatiability* reads smoothly in all versions, giving the sense of a stylistically coherent whole.

6. Conclusion

A more relaxed attitude to the original where the emphasis falls on transferring the general mood of the text rather than rendering the exact sense of every word seems to be a necessary strategy when dealing with linguistically challenging writers. Translation then becomes an act of interpretation, a way of transferring these qualities which according to the translator matter the most, and make the source text successful. With Witkacy, it is rather

impossible to ignore his idiosyncratic style, so both Gerould's and Iribarne's translations aim at creating the English equivalents of his peculiar lingo. At its most difficult, the task is comparable to translating Joyce, as in the case of the following sentence, recurrent in Witkacy's plays and prose: "Mieduwalszczycy skarmią na widok Czarnego Beata, Buwaja Piecyty" (Witkiewicz 1998: 347 and 1992: 23, 27).[7] This mysterious line, ostensibly taken "from a dream in 1912" (Witkiewicz 1998: 347), poses a challenge to Witkacy scholars and translators alike; there is even a theory that it is a secret anagram, a code to be cracked. By way of concluding this essay, it is perhaps worth comparing its two translations, one proposed by Gerould in *The Anonymous Work*, another by Iribarne in *Insatiability:*

> The Grizzzloviks yelp at the sight of Black Beatus the Trundler. (*The Anonymous Work*, 171)

> The intralevelers feed at the sight of the black beatus, boovering moddly coddlers. (*Insatiability*, 10, 14)

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[7] In *Insatiability* Witkacy uses the same sentence, recounting the main protagonist's dream. There is a minor difference in spelling: the words 'czarnego beata, buwaja piecyty' are written in the lower case. The sentence is only partly intelligible: the dream is unpleasant, evokes a sense of guilt, and involves hairy beats: 'black beatus' may mean Satan himself. 'Skarmią' brings to mind the Polish 'skamlą', suggesting animal-like humiliation. 'Buwaj' may be a reference to a bull (a combination of the Polish 'buhaj' and the French 'bovine'), and 'piecyta' carries an echo of 'piec' – 'oven', which altogether might suggest sexual 'heat'. It is thought that Witkacy may refer to his own nightmare from 1912, when he was subjected to psychoanalytic treatment by doctor Beaurain.

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